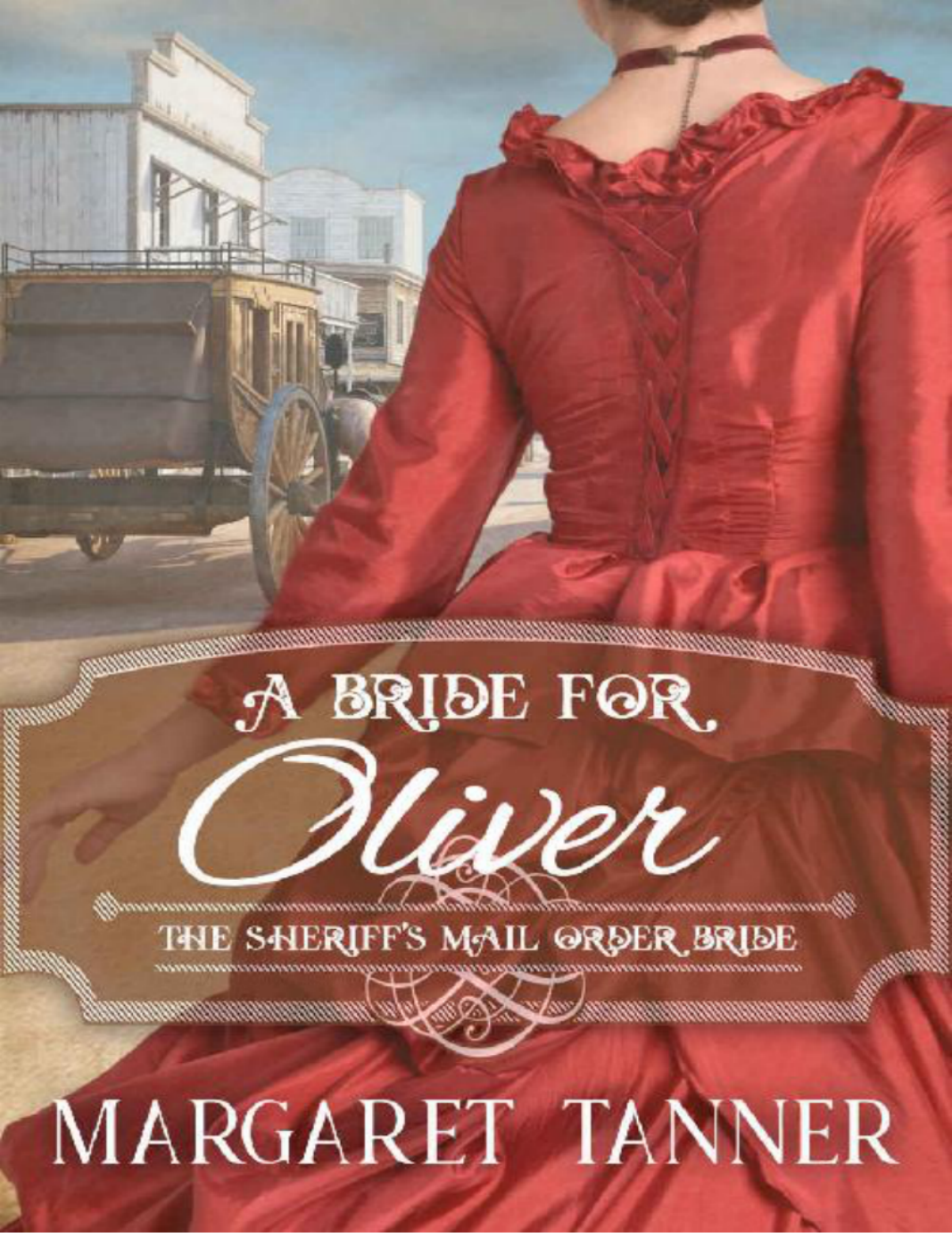

A BRIDE FOR
Oliver
THE SHERIFF'S MAIL ORDER BRIDE
MARGARET TANNER

A BRIDE FOR OLIVER

(THE SHERIFF'S MAIL ORDER BRIDE BOOK 2)

By
Margaret Tanner

Copyright © 2021 Margaret Tanner – A Bride for Oliver

Thank you for downloading this e-book. It remains the copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, scanned, or distributed for any commercial or non-commercial use without permission from the author and publisher. Quotes used in reviews are the exception. No alteration of content is allowed. If you enjoy this book, then please encourage your friends to purchase their own copy.

This story is a work of fiction, and to enhance the story, some literary license has been taken regarding setting and geography. All characters are a figment of the author's imagination.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to my author friend, Cheryl Wright, for all her help.

To my loyal readers: Thank you so much for your support. You can't know how much I appreciate it.

Cover Artist: Virginia McKevitt

Editor: Trudy Cordle

Chapter One

1870's - Wyoming

"You will marry Vince when he is released from prison." Seth Jamieson's voice was hard and implacable.

"But why?" Zoey wailed.

"Because I say so," Seth snarled. "Vince wants you for his wife, and that is the end of it. You keep this gal under control Gloria, or I will."

I won't do it, Zoey thought mutinously. Her stepbrother, Vince, was evil and vicious and serving time for bashing a would-be suitor of hers to within an inch of his life.

She shot a desperate glance at her mother.

Ma avoided her eyes. "No arguing at the table," she said.

Seth muttered something before shoveling another fork full of food into his mouth. How her mother, a once genteel, refined woman could marry an uncouth bully like him, Zoey had no idea. Pa had died when she was a baby and her mother had waited five years before marrying Seth, who had two sons, Vince and Frank. Luckily, she still bore her own father's name of Ebron.

"When is Vince getting out?" Frank asked. Zoey didn't particularly like him, but he wasn't violent like his older brother.

Vince was no good; everyone knew it except his father, who thought he could do no wrong. He blamed his son's violence on the fact everyone had a vendetta against him. She knew from past experience he was just plain evil. Marriage to him would be unbearable.

At twenty-one, Zoey knew she should have been married, but Seth always scared any would-be beau off because he wanted her to wed his son. Did Seth guess that given half a chance she would run away? Why Vince had his heart set on a virgin bride when he was supposed to have bedded many women over the years, was a complete mystery to her.

She had to get away from here before Vince returned. A few months was all she had to formulate an escape plan. The beautifully cooked meal suddenly tasted foul and she had to force it down her throat.

"I don't know why you're saving her for Vince," Frank whined. "I could marry her."

"Shut up, boy. She belongs to Vince," her stepfather growled.

She opened her mouth to say something, then thought better of it. No point antagonizing Seth. Once he made up his mind, he would never change it.

For all his bullying tactics and bluster, Seth had never once hit her or her mother, but was still somehow able to instill fear in them.

On this isolated ranch, which was set on a flat section of land surrounded by canyons, there was only one way in. It was through a narrow opening in the towering cliffs, barely wide enough to allow a large wagon to pass through. A massive two-foot-thick gate would withstand practically everything, except a battering ram. Here in his kingdom, Seth's word was law. He was the only one with a set of keys to unlock the gate and he guarded them like a miser did his gold.

Over the last two years, she had rarely left the ranch and then never without either Seth or Frank accompanying her. Prior to this, she had been able to go into town for shopping with her mother, but now the closer it came to the date of Vince's release, the more obsessed Seth became. He feared she might try to make a run for it and kept her a virtual prisoner to make sure it never happened.

The house was large and comfortable, as befitted a prosperous rancher. Seth had several men working for him, but they were forbidden to come anywhere near the house or the front and back yards. He built a new bunkhouse half a mile away from the house to ensure they stayed away.

After supper, Seth plodded off to his office to start on the ranch accounts. Frank went off to the bunkhouse to play cards with some of the men, leaving the two women to clear up and wash the dishes.

"I can't live like this," Zoey said as she dried the dishes and put them away in the large pine dresser. "I can't marry Vince. You know what he's like. You have to help me get away from here."

"I can't."

"I'm your daughter."

"I dare not."

"What kind of mother are you, to let your only child be forced to marry a man like him?"

Ma wrung her hands. "Even if I could get you out of here, where would you go?"

"Anywhere."

"I can't help you."

Zoey's eyes filled with tears. "I'll kill myself before I let that beast touch me."

The color drained out of her mother's face until it was parchment white. "You're becoming overwrought. Don't let Seth hear you carrying on like this."

"You never should have married him."

"I was lonely after your father died and he was rich, so I thought he could give us a good life."

"A good life?" Zoey's voice rose. "We're prisoners."

"Please, stop it. I'm not well and can't put up with this kind of thing."

"You've been saying you're unwell for months. It's just an excuse." She hated sounding harsh, but her mother had used the excuse once too often, and she would not fall for it again. Sadness overwhelmed her because mothers and daughters should be close, yet they weren't; hadn't been for years, if she really thought about it.

"I might go to bed," her mother said. "I really don't feel well. These scenes upset me. Doc Winters says I have to take care of myself."

"You've seen the doctor? When?"

"On my visits to town."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know." She felt terrible about being so harsh with her mother now.

"How could you? You never leave here."

"Only because Seth won't let me."

"I know it's difficult, and Seth is a hard man, but he's been a good provider over the years."

"A good provider?" Zoey felt like stamping her foot in frustration. "You're making it sound as if we've been ladies of leisure. We've both worked hard inside the house, not to mention outside when he's been short-handed."

"I know, but I can't afford to fall foul of him now. I need him to pay for the expensive medicines that are keeping me alive."

When had her mother become so ill? Over the last few months, she had been so pre-occupied with thinking of ways to get out of marrying Vince, she had taken little notice of anything else.

"I'm sorry, I should have seen you weren't well, but I've been too worried about Vince. I can't marry such a brute of a man." She shuddered. "My life with him would be a nightmare."

"I know. I've tried to reason with Seth about it, but he's obsessed with Vince getting what he wants. And apparently he wants you." Ma sighed. "I'll try to think of some way out for you."

"If I went into town with you, I just wouldn't come back."

“Where would you go?” Her mother wrung her hands. “What would you do?”

“Anything would be better than marrying him.”

“No, it would not. Believe me, Zoey, it wouldn’t. You would still be living here with all your nice things. Maybe the years in prison have softened him.”

“The thought of Vince touching me fills me with revulsion. I can’t do it. I can’t.”

“Keep your voice down. I’ll try to think of something. Now, I have to go to bed. I’ll just say goodnight to Seth. I’m going into town tomorrow to see Doc Winters.”

“I’ll come into town with you.”

“Seth won’t allow it.”

“If you aren’t well, you can’t drive in alone.”

“Frank is taking me. Don’t make a fuss, I’m too unwell to put up with it.”

Zoey watched her mother shuffle out of the room. Were her shoulders a little more slumped than normal? Her face was pale, with dark bags hanging under her eyes. *Why didn’t I notice this before?*

Over the last eighteen months, she had noticed that Seth slept in a different bedroom than her mother. There were seven bedrooms in the house, so he had plenty to choose from.

The house was enormous. Too big really. No wonder they were kept busy keeping it clean. As well as his obsession with Vince, Seth hated to see any signs of dirt or dust inside. Dusty surfaces sent him into a rage, so they were constantly dusting and polishing to keep his wrath at bay. She often wondered whether the madness, which ran in his family on the maternal side, had overtaken him as well.

Chapter Two

The next day, Zoey waited anxiously for her mother to return from town. Frank had driven her in, and he was never in a hurry to get back to the ranch, as it gave him a chance to get away from his father's ill humor. She always smelled whiskey on his breath when he returned, so it was easy to work out where he spent his time.

Please, God, she prayed desperately that her mother would find a solution. Even though she didn't know what it could be. She was desperate enough to try anything. None of the ranch hands would dare to help her, as they were too fearful of losing their jobs, if not their lives.

Seth was out working. His latest scheme was to dam the creek and cut off the water supply to ranches further down-stream. He obviously figured if he could deprive them of water, they would have to abandon their spreads and he could buy them up cheaply. Any wonder he was the most hated man around the Buttress area.

She had a nice piece of beef slowly roasting in the oven for supper, and had also prepared the vegetables, so they were ready to go in the baking dish. Ma had promised to buy an apple pie from the new bakery in town. She had never seen it because of being trapped out here.

Finally, on seeing the buckboard pull up in the backyard, she hurried outside. Ma climbed down with the help of Frank, and Zoey dashed over to them. For once her mother had color in her cheeks. The trip to town had obviously been beneficial to her.

"Did you have a good trip?"

"Yes." Her mother gave a slight smile. "I'd love a cup of coffee."

"I'll get you one. It won't take long as I kept the coffee pot hot."

Frank was grinning like a weasel in a hen house, an obvious sign he had enjoyed himself and not only with whisky. The stench of cheap perfume almost made her eyes water.

"Help me bring this stuff in," he said. "Your mother waltzes off like a queen, leaving me to do everything."

"Ma isn't well," Zoey snapped as she picked up a basket with a crunchy loaf of bread peeking out, and hopefully the apple pie.

"Yeah, leave all the heavy stuff for me."

"I intend to, with you being so strong and manly." She gave him a fake smile and he was drunk enough to fall for it.

"Yeah, I am. Lulu at the Golden Slipper said I'm all man."

“I bet she did. For a price.” She muttered the last three words as she walked away.

Inside the kitchen, her mother was already seated at the table waiting for the coffee.

“Did you get the apple pie? I can see you got the bread. It smells delicious. Much better than what we can bake.”

Frank trudged in carrying two twenty-pound bags of flour. He was quite strong, she had to give him that, although on pain of death she would never tell him. He was only twelve months older than her and they had been rivals since childhood.

“You better have a cup of coffee and sober up before your father gets home. I’m too weary to put up with arguing right now,” ma said.

“How did it go with the doctor?” Zoey asked.

Ma sighed. “All right, I suppose. There’s no change, but the medicine he orders from New York is helping. I have to go back and see him again next week.”

“As long as it’s working.” Zoey started putting away the smaller items Frank was stacking on the end of the table.

“At least my condition isn’t getting worse. I don’t have very long left on this earth.”

“Ma! Don’t say that,” Zoey cried out in anguish. They were not particularly close, although she would be lost without her mother.

“It’s true. We might as well face up to the fact.” She sighed. “I’ve resigned myself to it. Thanks for your help, Frank I appreciate it.”

“It’s okay, gives me a chance to get off the place for a while.”

Ma suddenly stood and took a few paces before swinging around. “Zoey, I’m going to have a lie down, bring me in a cup of coffee when you make it. Oh, and the newspaper I bought for Seth. He likes to check the stock prices, but I might as well glance through it first.” She shuffled off.

“Do you want coffee, Frank?” Zoey asked as she checked the coffee pot.

“No, I’ve had enough to drink for one day.” He gave a silly grin.

“Maybe you should. It might sober you up before your father sees you.”

“He won’t care, he told me to enjoy myself in town and I did. I’m off to find him. I have to give him the gate key back.” He waved it around, purposely goading her.

She made a grab for the key. If only she could get hold of it.

Seth kept one key in the safe in his office. The one Frank had was the one he normally carried around everywhere he went, except when his son had to leave the ranch by the entrance gate.

There was another way off the ranch, which entailed walking through a waterless four-mile expanse of land deep within the canyon country. It was riddled with ravines and rocky ground, making it virtually impossible to cross on horseback.

She had been tempted to try to escape that way, but knew she would likely succumb to the harsh conditions in doing so. Even if she made it out of the canyon country, she faced a further five mile walk to the nearest ranch, followed by a further six miles to the nearest town. Over the years, Seth had bought out the closest ranches to isolate his ranch even more.

Zoey despaired of ever leaving this prison, but still prayed God would show her a way out. Hope was fading with Vince's impending release from the prison in Laramie. He had been violent before, and it went without saying he would be even worse after his years of incarceration.

After the coffee was ready, she took it in to her mother along with the newspaper. "Here you are. I'll put it on the side table so you can reach it easily."

She helped her mother sit up and pushed a couple of pillows behind her back to make her more comfortable. "There you go. Did you want a slice of cake?"

Ma shook her head. "No, it might spoil my supper. The meat smells good."

"It should be nice and tender. I've given it plenty of time. I'll put the vegetables on soon."

"Good idea."

Here they were, mother and daughter exchanging pleasantries like two polite strangers. It broke her heart to think they had been reduced to this kind of relationship. Over the last few years, Seth had deliberately driven a wedge between them.

Zoey left the room feeling suddenly hopeless and weighed down with despair. It was tempting to seek solace with a slice of apple pie to go with her coffee, but she resisted. Shoving food in her mouth would not help her escape from this intolerable position.

After she finished her coffee, she tidied up the kitchen, making sure it was spotless for when Seth returned. He was so fanatical about the house being immaculate, he would fly into a rage if it was not. He never worried over much about his own appearance, often going for

days without shaving. Most days he didn't bother to even change out of his work clothes to eat supper.

"Zoey, Zoey," ma called out and she dashed into the bedroom.

"What's wrong?" She skidded to a halt on seeing her mother still sitting propped up against the pillows with the newspaper in her hand.

"Ma, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Are the men back yet?"

"No."

"Good. Look at this." Ma shoved the paper into her hand. "Read the classifieds."

"Why would I want to read the classified ads in a paper?"

"Because there is a widower from Colorado urgently in need of a Mail Order Bride."

"A what?"

"Read it, quickly. It could be your way out of marrying Vince."

Wife wanted. Young Christian woman wanted by widowed thirty-six-year-old rancher with eight-year-old daughter.

Must be of sober habits and have a good knowledge of housekeeping. Most importantly, must like children.

Please write to Widower, C/O- Broken River mercantile.

"You should write to him." Ma's face became animated for the first time in months.

"I don't know." Zoey gnawed her lip. Dare she do it? Marry a man she had never met?

"He couldn't be worse than Vince," ma said. "It's your only hope."

What her mother said was true; no man could be as bad as Vince unless he was the devil incarnate.

"How can I exchange letters with him when I can't leave this place?"

"I'll take them in on my visits into Buttress to see the doctor."

Hope rose in Zoey's breast. Marrying a man she didn't know still had to be better than the alternative.

"If we did agree to marry, how would I get to him?" Hope quickly started to fade, leaving her with a feeling of black despair.

"Don't let on you know, but Seth wants all of us to go to Laramie to collect Vince from the prison when he's released."

"What!"

“He wants Vince to marry you the moment he’s set free.”

Zoey gasped in shock and started to tremble.

“Laramie isn’t too far away from Denver. We’ll be spending the night before his release at the hotel, and the night after, so you will be well and truly Mrs. Vince Jamieson by the time we head for home.”

Bile rose in Zoey’s throat and she had to swallow down on the bitterness. “I’ll do it.”

“You will probably have to escape from the hotel in Laramie before Vince is released.”

“How can I do that?”

“I don’t know. That will be up to you. I’ll help you as much as I can, but I can’t risk Seth finding out. Write the letter in your room later and make sure he doesn’t find it.”

“He goes to my room?” Zoey asked, feeling sick to her stomach.

“Yes, sometimes he does.”

“Why don’t you stop him?”

“I’ve told you before how things are. I can’t risk falling foul of him.”

“How dare he violate my privacy. Wait until I see him. I’ll…”

“You will say nothing, but make sure you hide the letter and not in the drawer, either. That’s where he looks.”

“He touches my clothes?” The thought of Seth’s fat fingers touching her undergarments filled her with revulsion.

“Take the paper and put it on Seth’s armchair in the sitting room ready for him to read after supper. Now go, I want to rest for a while.”

Zoey removed the pillows from behind her mother and made her comfortable, before leaving the room with her mind in turmoil. What kind of man would advertise for a wife in the classified section of a newspaper? A desperate one who was looking for a mother for his daughter. She could not condemn him for that. A lot of small western towns had few single, respectable women of marriageable age available.

Chapter Three

That night in her room, Zoey closed the door and wedged a piece of wood under it, making it hard to open. She took a sheet of paper and a pencil out of her dresser.

Dear Sir,

She nibbled the top of the pencil.

I saw your advertisement in the classified section of the paper.

I would like to be considered as an applicant. It sounded like she was applying for a job. Well, in a way she was.

I am twenty-one years old and five feet two inches in height and I have brown hair and blue eyes.

I am writing this letter to you in the strictest confidence, as my situation would be quite intolerable if anyone found out I am doing this.

She stopped to think. Dangerous to give out too much information about herself at this time, as she knew so little about the man, but she had to pique his interest.

I am a decent, well brought up Christian who is a good cook and housekeeper. I have lived on a ranch all of my life and can competently perform most ranch chores. I do like children, but have to confess to not having had a lot to do with them.

I can provide character references if necessary. It was a lie, because she would be hard pressed to find a person she could ask, things being the way they were.

Yours sincerely,

Zoey Ebron.

She didn't know what she would do if the man failed to select her.

Zoey spent the longest three weeks of her life waiting for a reply from the man, and now she finally had his letter in her apron pocket. Ma had started having weekly visits into the doctor now. Seth grumbled about Frank being taken from his chores so often, yet he never stopped them from going.

Ma always brought him back a newspaper, which mollified him a little, not to mention the crusty fresh bread that he liked. She could barely stop herself from dashing out of the room to read her letter. Today of all days, Seth had decided to come back early from work to go over some of his ranch accounts. It was almost as if he knew she was waiting on something, but how could he?

Finally, she could stand the suspense no longer. “I might go out and check on the washing,” she said. “I don’t want to leave that quilt out on the line any longer than necessary or the sun might fade it.”

Seth had ordered her to start preparing Vince’s room for his return, including moving the double bed from the main bedroom and into his.

“You might as well make it comfortable.” He had leered at her. “I guarantee you and Vince will be spending a lot of time in it. A baby every twelve months will keep you out of mischief and help me build a Jamieson dynasty.”

Not if I can help it, she thought. “I’ll collect the eggs, too. It will save me doing it later.”

Forcing herself to walk casually out of the house was hard when she was anxious to read the letter. Please, God, she prayed desperately. Let the man want me.

Her heart was slamming against her ribcage as she walked to the clothesline where the double patchwork quilt flapped in the breeze. It was dry, so she unpegged it and the other washing and folded them neatly before placing them in the cane clothing basket. Leaving it on the back porch, she made a dash to the privy so she could read the letter without interruption.

The handwriting on the front of the envelope was neat and on the back was the sender’s name. *Mr. Joseph Gentry. C/O- Mercantile. Broken Ridge Colorado.*

With trembling hands, she took the letter out.

Dear Miss Ebron,

You do sound most suitable for my needs.

I am aged thirty-six and am five feet ten inches tall, with dark hair and brown eyes. I own a small ranch three miles out of Broken River.

My daughter, Daisy, is seven years old and in need of a mother. My wife died five years ago and my wife’s cousin, who has been helping me look after Daisy, recently had the opportunity to marry and she took it. It is hard for a man to run a ranch, do domestic chores and care for a child, so you can see my need is urgent.

I am a Godfearing man of sober habits, but with Daisy getting older I am finding it harder, rather than easier, to look after her.

My brother is the sheriff here in Broken River and being a bachelor, he has tried to help me, but isn’t of much use with Daisy.

I have to confess I did receive a few replies, but you seemed the most suitable and the closest being as you are in Wyoming.

I look forward to receiving a reply from you and if you are agreeable to a

fairly quick marriage, it would be most convenient.

I will be happy to send you the money for your fares and expenses to get here.

I am not sure whether I can offer you love, as my late wife was my moon and my stars, but I can offer you affection and a comfortable life.

If you tell me what day you can come, I will meet you at the stage depot.

Joseph Gentry, Broken River, Colorado.

The poor man sounded desperate. And at least he was honest, and she admired him for the great love he obviously had for his late wife. He could not possibly be more desperate than her.

She would definitely write back accepting his proposal and promising to send him a telegram telling him exactly when she would arrive.

All she had to do was work out a plan of action. Ma's idea about escaping from the hotel in Laramie on the night of their arrival was a good one. She could find the local stage depot and start her journey, then change stagecoaches a couple of times to throw Seth off her track.

Tucking the letter back in her pocket, she made her way to the chicken coop to collect the eggs.

Chapter Four

Broken River, Colorado.

Sheriff Oliver Gentry couldn't believe he was hearing right. "You're getting married again? Who to? Surely not that battle-axe of a woman from the hat shop who had to be forty if she's a day."

"Of course not. I'm not that desperate."

Oliver sat in his chair as Joe prowled around the office.

"Who then?"

"Zoey Ebron."

"Never heard of her." Oliver rested his elbows on the desk and tented his fingers.

"She comes from Wyoming."

"Wyoming?" He was beginning to sound like a parrot. He could not understand his brother sometimes. After Laura died, he had vowed never to marry again. "How could you? Don't tell me you're getting a mail order bride?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I am."

Oliver slumped in his chair. "Are you loco?"

"Now Sadie has left, I can't cope with Daisy and the ranch on my own."

"I said I could help."

"I know you did, and I am grateful." Joe ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. "But you've got your job to do and well, it's Daisy I seem to be having the most difficulty with."

"Why? She's a good little kid."

"She is, but she needs a woman's care."

"She would be better off with no-one than some hag of a woman who has been passed over by other men."

"Zoey sounds nice, very sincere. She should be arriving here in about a month."

"And you're getting cold feet? And you should."

"I'm not getting cold feet. I just wanted to ask if you would stand up for me at the wedding ceremony."

Joe was four years old than him, but he often felt like the older brother. Joe and Laura had been childhood sweethearts and had got married as soon as the law and their parents allowed it. It had taken years and several miscarriages for them to get Daisy; then Laura had

fallen pregnant again and died, along with the baby, about five years ago. It had nearly destroyed Joe. He would have followed Laura to the grave, nothing surer, if it had not been for Daisy. He wanted his brother to be happy. If anyone deserved it Joe did, but marriage to some strange woman wouldn't give it to him.

"What do you say?"

"Of course, I'll do it, but you need to give this more thought. It's dangerous. This woman could be deranged or a fallen dove even."

"She sounded genuine and lives on a ranch, and reading between the lines, her homelife isn't good."

Oliver shook his head. "It could be a pack of lies. You've got Daisy to consider. She needs a decent, upright woman in her life not some, some…"

"We've decided to meet first and if we don't like each other, I promised to give her the money to leave town."

"It's fraught with danger." Oliver didn't like the sound of this one little bit. He knew there were few women of marriageable age to spare around here, from personal experience. A wife and children were something he had always dreamed of having, and it was not for want of trying that he was still a bachelor.

There had been at least three schoolteachers here, since he came to Broken River after Laura died, to help Joe. Each one of them had been snapped up by wealthy young ranchers. A mere sheriff could not compete with the money and property they had.

He did have some savings from his work as a bounty hunter, but not enough to buy a place of his own. Had he been able to keep working that way for another couple of years instead of coming here, he would have had enough saved. Not that he begrudged taking the job here as sheriff to support his brother after Laura died. Family came first with him, and as a boy Joe had always looked out for him.

"I'm off…"

"Sorry, Joe, what did you say?"

"I said, I'm off to see the preacher about getting married."

"I can't talk you out of it?"

"No, I've made up my mind. If, when I meet Zoey, she proves suitable, I'm going to marry her." There was a determined thrust to Joe's jaw now.

"I'm only trying to warn you about the perils you could face by doing something like this. I want you to be happy. You deserve to be, and Laura wouldn't begrudge you, but I don't know." He shook his head.

“Isn’t there some other way you can get a wife?”

“No.” Joe suddenly grinned. “If there was you would have found it. Maybe she has a sister.”

“I’m not interested. If I can’t find myself a woman in the usual way, I’ll go without.”

Joe laughed. “Ah, little brother. What am I going to do with you?”

Oliver grinned. “I’m sorry I told Deputy Harper I’d cover for him so he can join the poker tournament, no good will come of it.”

Joe put on his Stetson and with a wave, left him to worry about what would happen if this Zoey woman turned out to be as bad as he feared. If there was nothing wrong with her, why would she have to resort to answering a newspaper advertisement?

His brother Joe was far from wealthy, although he did own a nice little spread a couple of miles out of town. It was close enough to the school that in another year or so Daisy would be able to walk or ride there on her own.

He flipped through a few ‘Wanted’ posters. A warning had come through from the sheriff in Laramie about the impending release of dangerous criminals. The man didn’t have to do it, but obviously felt duty bound to warn his fellow lawmakers of anyone he considered a troublemaker.

Jerome Bailey and Vince Jamieson were the two names at the top of the list. He had never heard of either of them, but would keep his eyes and ears open just in case. Broken River was a quiet place, and he and Deputy Harper had little trouble keeping order here, which was the way they liked it.

As the last clod of dirt was tossed on to her mother’s coffin, Zoey’s knees buckled, and she would have fallen had Seth not grabbed her by the shoulders and held her up. “Don’t make an exhibition of yourself,” he hissed in her ear.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Zoey, Seth, Frank. Gloria was a good woman.” The mercantile owner’s wife patted Zoey on the arm. “If you need any help or support my dear…”

“She’s got plenty of support at the ranch, so no need to be concerning yourself.” Seth almost growled the words out. What a rude pig the man was.

He had kept her on a tight rein for the last few years, but the last week when they knew her mother would not survive, Seth never let her out of his sight. If he was unable to be with her, Frank kept guard

on her. He had even taken her shoes, so if she tried to escape it would be in bare feet. It was as if he feared that now ma was gone, she would make an escape attempt.

The preacher's wife came over to offer her condolences. "Would you like to come back to the house for coffee?"

"No, thanks. I need to be getting this gal home before she collapses." Seth's fingers biting into Zoey's shoulders forestalled her acceptance.

"No, thank you. Seth is right, I don't feel up to it." She gave what she hoped was an apologetic smile. Dare she ask these people for help? One look at her stepfather's grim features and she knew it would bring a parcel of trouble down on their heads, and she couldn't risk it. No, she would escape on her own – somehow.

Seth all but dragged her over to the buckboard, and she scrambled aboard rather than let him touch her again, while Frank climbed into the back.

"Hypocrites," Seth snarled, applying the whip with such vigor the horse reared, then took off at a gallop. He didn't slow the animal down until they were well out of town. "Pious hypocrites, the lot of them."

"They were trying to be kind."

He muttered a swear word.

"Maybe we should have stayed," Frank said. "Lucy Monroe was making cow eyes at me."

"That harlot. You stick to the soiled doves at the saloon then you won't get yourself into no trouble that way."

Zoey hated the disrespectful way Seth always referred to women. Suddenly, she wondered what his first wife had been like. Her name was never mentioned by Seth. Ma should never have married him. Her mother had been a refined ex-schoolteacher, and to her way of thinking it was inconceivable she would marry an uncouth pig like Seth.

She would mourn her mother's passing, but the love they had shared when she was a child had slowly withered and died, until there was little of it left.

"We'll be leaving for Laramie tomorrow," Seth said.

"I want to go," Frank whined.

"You're needed at the ranch, and that is my final word on the matter. Me and Zoey can ride there now Gloria's gone. It will be easier and quicker. I sent a telegram to the Royal Hotel and booked two rooms for us." Turning to Zoey he gloated. "You will be well and truly

wedded and bedded by the time we get back to the ranch."

"I don't want to marry Vince." She knew Seth would expect her to say this and he must never suspect she had no intention of being in Laramie when Vince was released. "I don't want to marry anyone."

"Too bad. If I were a few years younger, I'd marry you myself and create a Jamieson dynasty without Vince's help."

Chapter Five

They arrived at the gate to the ranch. Just looking at the height and thickness of the gate, not to mention the soaring, ragged cliffs on either side of it, reinforced to Zoey the impossibility of escaping through here without a key. If a wildfire happened to come through, they would all be trapped and incinerated, and the cattle and horses as well.

Seth climbed down from the buckboard and plodded over to the gate. She spotted the shiny key flashing in the sunlight when he withdrew it from his pocket. Purposely he raised it in the air to make sure she saw it.

“Drive the buckboard through,” he yelled at her. “Save me getting up and down all the time.”

“Giddup.” She flicked the reins to get the horse moving. She could never bring herself to whip the horse liked Seth always did.

“Once we get to the house, you put the coffee on and make something quick to eat while Frank and I change into our work clothes. I need to tell the men what they’re to do while I’m in Laramie.”

“Pa, you said I was in charge.”

“You are, but I still need to tell them what I want done and you will see they do it. Understand?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Don’t take such an insolent tone to me, boy, or you’ll feel this whip across your back.”

They arrived at the ranch house and Zoey climbed down from the buckboard. “If I cook pancakes will that do?”

“Yeah, make plenty. I’m hungry,” Seth snapped.

She hurried into the house, glad to be away from him. There was no time to change out of her best dress. All she could do was cover it with an apron. If Seth wanted anything, he got it. Her mother had drilled this into her early on. In this case, the quicker he left the house the better. She could barely stand being in the same room with him now.

The coffee was almost ready, the first batch of pancakes cooked by the time Seth stomped in with Frank slinking along a few paces behind him.

As he sat at the table and grabbed up the pancakes, Seth said, “Don’t forget, we’ll be leaving here tomorrow at first light. You can only take what will fit in your saddlebags. None of that female frippery, either.

We'll sleep out and save paying for accommodation so don't forget your bedroll." He went back to eating.

It went without saying she would wear male attire on the trip. A change of undergarments, a nightgown, hairbrush, and reticule would be about all she could take as they had to carry food as well. They would be sleeping out for three nights, which meant hard riding from dawn to dusk.

After tossing plans around in her head over the last few days, she decided escaping from Laramie would give her the best chance of success. She had been banking on having her mother on hand to help. Ma had dutifully posted and delivered the two letters she had exchanged with Joseph Gentry. Other than that, she had seemingly washed her hands of the whole affair, her daughter included.

It was sad to think they had drifted so far apart as the years went by. It was as if Seth had slowly sucked any loving feelings out of her, leaving only an empty shell of a woman instead of the vibrant, loving mother she had once been.

"Anymore pancakes," Seth yelled as if she was twenty yards away instead of only a couple of feet.

"Just getting them out now."

"I'll have more, too," Frank said.

"Okay, there's plenty of mixture." She didn't feel hungry. At the moment, she didn't care whether she ate or not. All she wanted was to get them out of the house so she could plot and plan her escape. There had to be more than one plan. The thought suddenly popped into her head, just in case one plan went bad. Laramie was her best bet, unless the right opportunity presented itself before she arrived there.

She had done as Joseph suggested, and in her last letter had told him the date of her arrival. If she got to Broken River earlier, she figured she could easily contact him, as his ranch was close to town. He sounded like a nice man and the fact his brother, Oliver, was the sheriff made her feel safer and more confident about undertaking such a venture.

Mid-afternoon on the fourth day, Zoey and Seth rode down the main street of Laramie. They and their mounts were hot and sweaty after their grueling ride. She noticed the livery as they rode past it.

"Aren't we going to stable the horses in the livery?" she asked.

"No, they've got stables at the hotel. All part of the price."

"I didn't realize."

“I’m getting too old for this,” Seth growled. “I’ll be glad to hand the ranch over to Vince.”

“What about Frank?”

“He’s too stupid and weak. Vince will look out for him once I’m gone, and if you’re any kind of a woman, you’ll have given him three or four sons by then.”

She was nearly going to ignore the statement but to allay his suspicion asked, “Why do I have to marry Vince?”

“Because I said so.”

“I want to find my own husband. Please, Seth.”

“You’re marrying Vince and that’s final.”

“He might not want me.”

“After being locked away for over four years,” he gave a cruel laugh. “He’ll want you all right. He’ll be like a rutting bull.”

The Royal Hotel was a double storied affair and quite an impressive looking place.

They dismounted and tied their mounts to the hitching rail. Seth grabbed his saddle bags, and she did likewise.

“I’ll need to buy a horse and gear for Vince, too. Now, you keep your mouth shut in here, I’ll do the talking.” He stared down at the twin Colts he was wearing, and fear shivered through her. She didn’t doubt for one moment he would shoot her legs out from under her if he caught her trying to escape.

“I’ve booked us upstairs rooms.”

Zoey’s heart dropped to her boots; she had been praying the hotel would be a single story place. She trudged into the lobby a couple of steps behind Seth. It was an effort to drag one foot after the other.

Behind a fancy desk sat a middle-aged man. He gave them a haughty stare, as if he didn’t think they were good enough to enter his establishment.

“I’m Seth Jamieson. I booked two rooms.”

“Oh, Mr. Jamieson, of course. Welcome to the Royal Hotel.” The man was all deference now and his ingratiating manner sickened her, considering only a few moments ago he was prepared to kick them out in the street.

“Are they upstairs?” Seth asked.

“Yes. Unfortunately, not next to each other.”

“I specifically ordered…”

“I’m sorry, you’re only one room apart. It was the best we could do. We serve breakfast, luncheon and supper here for our guests.”

“My daughter will be taking her meals in her room.” Seth flashed her a ferocious look, daring her to argue. “Our horses need taking care of.”

“Of course.” The man rang a bell and a girl wearing a black dress covered by a starched white apron hurried through the side door.

“Take Mr. Jamieson and his daughter upstairs to their rooms. Nine and eleven.” The man handed Seth one key and went to give the other one to Zoey.

“I’ll take charge of these.” Seth snatched the key from the man’s hand.

“After you’ve taken our guests to their rooms, find Chuck and get him to see to the horses.”

“They’re hitched outside, the two bays,” Seth said as they followed the maid out of the lobby. A door to their right had ‘Guest’s Dining Room’ written on it in gold lettering.

“My daughter is exhausted. Can you bring her up coffee and something to eat?”

“Of course, Sir. What about you?”

“Yeah, me, too. Bring it all to my room and I’ll take hers in to her.”

Zoey stifled a gasp.

“But, Sir, I could…”

“Bring it to me and no arguing if you want to keep your job.”

Zoey watched fear darken the girl’s eyes.

“Yes, Sir, of course. Whatever you say, Sir.”

At the top of the stairs, they turned right. Room nine was closest to the back of the hotel, eleven closest to the stairs.

“My daughter will be having Room nine. Now go and get the coffee and bring it to me.”

The girl darted off.

“Right.” Seth unlocked the door and Zoey stepped into the room. Her frightened gaze immediately went to the large double bed.

“I’ll bring the coffee in when it comes. You’ll be having supper here, too.”

“What about the dining room?”

“You will be staying here under lock and key, just in case you’re thinking about doing something stupid like running away.”

He left the room, locking the door with a loud click behind him. She

was still a prisoner, only it was in a hotel room and not on the ranch. Her mouth dried up and she wrung her hands. Her escape plans were in disarray. How could she get to Broken River and Joseph now?

"Don't be so weak, Zoey Ebron," she muttered, suddenly feeling thankful she had never had to take Seth's surname. "You can climb out the window if you have to." Not from up here she couldn't.

Dashing to the window, she stared down at the ground. It was a long way away. There were bushes growing along the wall, but it had to be more than a ten-foot drop. If only she had a rope.

She paced the floor with despair building up. *I can't give up at the first hurdle.* Glancing over at the double bed, she cringed on thinking about what Vince would demand once they were wed and he got her up here.

On the ride here, she had mentally taken note of every signpost within a few miles of Laramie to get her bearings, and now had a rough idea of the stage route. Safer not to catch it here in Laramie, she decided. Riding to the next stop and catching the stage from there would be better.

In preparation for the trip, she had sewn herself a cloth belt in which to keep her money and Joseph's letters. She wore it under her camisole, where it would be safe, as Seth often searched through her belongings. Even her mother had mentioned it, and she would not trust him as far as she could kick him. In her worst nightmare, she had never dreamed he would be sneaky enough to have them staying in an upstairs room.

She heard the key turn in the lock and quickly sat on a chair in front of the mirror pretending to tidy up her hair.

"Here's your food." Seth dumped the tray on the dresser. "You'll be having an early supper. I'll bring that in, too, and I'll tell the maid she can collect the tray in the morning."

"Where will you be eating?"

"Down in the dining room, then I plan on having a few whiskies in the saloon before I retire."

"What about me?"

"You won't be leaving this room until it's time to go and collect Vince."

He waited, almost expecting her to argue with him as she always did, and she dared not disappoint him by acting any differently to normal.

"That's not fair." She climbed to her feet. "How can I escape from the dining room if you're with me?"

“I don’t aim on taking the risk. You always were a devious, underhanded little brat, and that hasn’t changed over the years.”

“I wouldn’t have had to be if you hadn’t kept me a prisoner.”

“Shut your mouth.”

He stomped across the room, closed the door with a loud click, then she heard the key turning in the lock. While she drank the coffee and ate the still warm buttered biscuits, she racked her brain for a way to climb out the window and get to the ground without breaking her neck.

Chapter Six

“I don’t want to go to school, Uncle Ollie,” Daisy said, her big brown eyes filling with tears. She was so like her father it had Oliver swallowing a lump in his throat.

Poor Joe had been waiting impatiently for his mail order bride to arrive, and he had suddenly dropped dead in the feed store. The injustice of what had happened tore his heart apart. Except for little Daisy, sadly he had no blood kin left.

“You have to go to school, sweetheart. I know it’s hard.” What an understatement; he felt completely overwhelmed by the loss of his brother. How would a little girl feel? The preacher’s wife had suggested it might be a good idea to find a loving couple to adopt Daisy.

Over my dead body. He would bring her up, even if he were clueless when it came to children. Somehow, he would manage.

“Look at my petticoat.” Daisy pushed up her dress.

“What’s wrong with it? I washed it, so it’s nice and clean.”

“It isn’t white anymore. It’s dirty.”

He had to admit it did have a blueish tinge to it. The color from her navy dress had run into it. He hadn’t realized that white clothes needed to be soaked separately from colored ones. How was he supposed to know such things?

“No-one will see it if you don’t lift your skirt.” He winced, there had to be a better way of putting it. “I tell you what. You go off to school and we can go to the diner for supper. Deal?”

Her small hand shot out and he shook it.

“Deal, Uncle Ollie.”

Luckily, the school was on his way into town and Daisy was happy to ride up in front of him. She used to go home with one of her school friends, and he would pick her up after work. Fortunately, his deputy had been prepared to move into the small premises he had occupied next to the sheriff’s office, where he had lived before moving to the ranch. Hank was a good man and he had been very obliging in working longer hours to cover his absences.

Hank knew the town and the people in it. If only he could have trained him up a little more, then he could have recommended him to the powers that be and handed the sheriff reins over to him straight away. It would be better than bringing in a man from somewhere else.

On arrival at the school, the teacher came out to greet them. “How are

things going, Sheriff?"

He touched his hat. "Okay." Myra Martin was a thirty-eight-year-old spinster. She seemed a nice enough woman, but was as plain as a fence post. He only hoped she wasn't going to become interested in him. She held no appeal for him whatsoever.

"Good morning, Daisy."

"Good morning, Miss Martin. You won't forget the diner, Uncle Ollie?"

"No, sweetheart, I won't." He noticed what he thought was expectation flare in the teacher's eyes, then it faded away, leaving him feeling like a polecat for not inviting her along. It was not that he begrudged paying for her meal, it was just that he didn't want to raise her hopes about there being anything more than a casual friendship between them.

Maybe he should not have been so hasty in writing to Zoey Ebron to tell her not come here because Joseph had died. He had followed it up with a telegram to make sure she got the message. *Please don't come to Broken River.* It had been rather brutal, but he hadn't wanted to bring her here under false pretenses.

Now he was far from sure he had done the right thing. If she had arrived and been some crazed hag, then what would he do? Joseph had always been much braver than he was when it came to matters of the heart. He had loved Laura and overcome parental disapproval, lack of money and their youthful age to marry her.

Oh, Joe. What am I going to do?

He had barely set foot in the office when Hank came dashing up to him. "I had to put one of the Caldwell boys in the cell for creating a ruckus in the saloon last night."

"If he has sobered up, let him go. He never could hold his drink."

"I did. He vomited all over the cell and I…"

"I'll clean it up. You go and get some rest." What a way to start the day.

Oliver glanced at the mess Caldwell had left behind. Liquored up cowhands were a menace. Throwing his hat on the desk, he strode out the back of the cells to the well, which was shared by several shop owners. Filling up a bucket, he brought it inside and tossed in a piece of soap and started mopping up the mess. If the cowboy was still here, he would be tempted to rub his nose in it.

He opened the doors and windows to get rid of the stench, then returned to the backyard to lead his horse out of the sun and take the gelding to the stable area where Hank's horse grazed.

“Well, boy.” He patted the gelding’s neck. “I’ve had a real bad start to my day, so hopefully it will get better. It couldn’t get much worse unless there was a shooting.”

Back inside, he started on a mountain of paperwork. This was one thing he would not miss if he gave up being sheriff.

Mid-morning, he made himself a cup of coffee. Halfway through drinking it, old Mrs. Orange shuffled in.

“Someone stole my dog last night. I want you to arrest them.”

He threw aside his pencil. “Who stole it?”

“I don’t know, young man, it’s your job to find out.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t know who stole it how can I arrest them?” In his experience, if a man’s morning started off bad, things could only get worse as the day wore on, and today was a prime example of it.

Giving a sigh, he said. “I’ll come over and check, but I’m not sure there is much I can do.”

Out in the street, he took the woman’s arm to support her. The old dear didn’t look too steady on her feet. The stagecoach flashed by, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, and she shook her fist at it.

“In my day, stage drivers treated the townsfolk with respect. Racing through here, covering my dress in dust. It’s disgraceful.”

Mrs. Orange lived a couple of streets back from the main street. Her backyard ran into a tributary of the Broken River.

“She never leaves the house. I know my little Mimi has been stolen.”

Once they got to the house, Oliver immediately noticed a hole in the back fence. It was not big enough for an adult to get through, although a small a dog easily could.

“It looks like she escaped through there.” He pointed. “What does she look like?”

“She’s white with a few tan patches.”

“Okay, you go inside, and I’ll check.”

Mrs. Orange wrung her hands. “You don’t think she could have fallen in the river and drowned?”

“No, dogs can swim.”

“Can they?”

“Yes.” Give me strength, he thought, watching as the old lady slowly made her way inside while he strode down the backyard. No wonder there was a hole in the fence, the wood was rotted. He opened the rickety back gate and almost skidded to a halt. Mimi was misbehaving

herself with another dog. He burst out laughing. If he was a betting man, he would say Mimi could be a mama in the not-too-distant future. With a bark, her beau dashed off.

“Come on.” Oliver picked her up. “Your mistress has been searching for you. You are a naughty girl.”

The dog whimpered.

“I don’t think your beau will be back, now he has had his wicked way with you.” What would he tell the old lady, he wondered, as he got to the back door.

“Mrs. Orange. I found her.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you. Mimi, you are a naughty girl.”

If only the old lady knew exactly how naughty Mimi had been. He decided not to tell her, in case nothing untoward happened, but he certainly would not be taking bets on it. “I think you need a new fence; the palings are all rotted. If I had the time, I’d fix it for you.”

“You don’t need to worry about it, my son calls in every few days so he can do it.”

“All right, Ma’am.” He touched his hat and strode off.

He couldn’t decide whether he had done the right thing by not letting her know exactly what Mimi had been up to. No point causing the old lady distress if nothing untoward happened. He justified his decision by thinking along these lines. He didn’t know the old lady’s son, but hoped he would come and quickly fix his mother’s fence, so there wouldn’t be another episode like this.

Chapter Seven

Arriving back at the office, Oliver strode inside and stopped dead in his track. A young woman, dressed in brown pants with a dark colored vest over her blue shirt, was pacing the floor. She sure did have a fine figure. A long plait of brown hair almost reached her waist.

He cleared his throat and she swung around, causing him to stifle a gasp. She was real pretty, with bright blue eyes and creamy white skin. What was he thinking?

“Ma’am, can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m looking for Joseph Gentry.”

Oliver stepped back. This could not possibly be…

“I’m Zoey Ebron, and you must be Oliver.”

“I am. Didn’t you get my letter?”

“What letter?

“I think you should sit down, um, Miss Ebron. I’ve got some bad news.”

Her face crumpled. “He’s married someone else?”

“No. I’m sorry, but he…he died.”

Oliver caught her as she collapsed in a dead faint. He picked her up and strode over to the empty, now clean, cell and laid her on the bed.

“Wake up.” He tapped her cheek and the skin felt soft and smooth under his fingertips. “Zoey, wake up.” A mail order bride she might be, but she was certainly no hag. Far from it.

She groaned and slowly opened her eyes. “Where am I?”

“In one of my cells.”

Fear darkened her eyes. “What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything except faint.”

“You said Joseph was dead?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.” He helped her sit up. “He dropped dead at the feed store.”

When he saw the distraught expression on her face, he felt like cutting his tongue out for being so blunt.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to put it so bluntly. I’m still upset myself.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Joseph said you were close.” She touched his hand and every nerve ending felt her soft caress. “What about little Daisy? Poor baby.”

“She’s fine. I’m looking after her.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Yes, I can. I’m her uncle. You can’t imagine I would abandon her.”

“No, of course not. I…I just thought you being a man and all.”

“I’ll admit it’s not easy trying to plait her hair and all that stuff.”

“I guess it would be hard for a man.”

“Joe learned how to do it, so I’ll be able to with a bit more practise. Why did you come? I wrote telling you about Joe.”

“Wrote! Where?”

“To the address on the envelope, where else?”

“You didn’t, Oliver. Tell me you didn’t.” She started shaking.

“I just finished telling you I did write.” What was wrong with the woman? If she looked pale before, it was nothing to how she looked now. There was not a vestige of color left in her face and she trembled from head to foot.

“Now they know where I am, they’ll come for me.”

“Who will come for you?” This situation was getting stranger by the minute, he thought, with worry now churning his stomach.

Zoey stared into Oliver Gentry’s tanned face. With slightly overlong dark hair and brown eyes, he was a fine-looking man. He could not know it, but he had just signed her death warrant or worse. Vince would come after her. She didn’t doubt it for a single moment. Seth probably as well.

There was no other way out. She had to tell him the story. It took a few minutes to get it all out and she watched his jaw drop. His eyes widened in disbelief.

“Vince will force me to marry him. I know he will. I’d rather be dead than married to *that* man.”

“What about if you were married to me?” Oliver said. “That would mess up their evil plans. You could help me with Daisy.” He gnawed his lower lip. “It would take care of a few problems. What do you say?”

“I don’t know. What if it puts you and Daisy in danger? I couldn’t bear that.”

“It won’t,” he scoffed. “There are few men I can’t handle. I’m the sheriff, remember?”

“Vince has always been vicious, and he’ll be much worse now he’s

been in prison."

"You wouldn't be talking about Vince Jamieson, by any chance?"

"Yes. How did you know?" She wrung her hands.

"I received a report about him and a couple of other impending releases from the prison in Laramie."

"He'll come here after me. I know he will."

"If you're married to me, why would he? He would find himself another woman. Write to your stepfather, and tell him you're married to someone else now, and I guarantee that will be the end of it."

She wanted to believe him, but fear of Vince and Seth's obsession, made it hard to believe her ordeal would be over so easily. Poor Joseph. From his letters, she had liked the man. Now he was dead. What a tragedy for little Daisy. The child would be distraught.

"What do you say, Zoey? Marry me and be a mother to Daisy. She's a real little darling and I know you two will get along well."

Dare she do it? Seth wanted Vince to have a virgin bride to breed from and create a Jamieson dynasty. If she was a married woman in every sense of the word, they wouldn't want her. She would be useless to them. Vince would have to go and find another woman to become his brood mare, and she pitied any woman who married him. As selfish as it seemed, she had to think of her own wellbeing first.

"Come on, Zoey. Will you marry me?"

"I, um. Would it be a marriage in name only?"

Red tinged his cheeks. "Well, I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"It would have to be a proper marriage." She blurted the words out, hoping she didn't sound too forward.

Her words had his jaw dropping. "What?"

"If it were, I mean a real marriage, I would be safe. Seth wants to have a virgin bride for Vince, and I wouldn't be one."

"I guess not." He gnawed his lower lip again.

"You don't fancy me?"

"A man would have to be half dead not to fancy you. I was just thinking, we don't know each other is all. I mean, I would have been prepared to wait for a while."

"I can't wait, Oliver. I dare not."

He laughed. "Well, there's an offer no red-blooded man could refuse."

"I hope you don't think I'm fickle. I wasn't looking on Joseph as a free meal ticket. I was prepared to be a good wife to him and a mother to

Daisy, but I didn't know him. It's not as if we had met and fallen in love." She could not believe she was babbling like this, but didn't want Oliver to think badly of her.

"Don't say anymore, Zoey. Joe would understand. He loved Laura, his first wife, so much. They were soul mates you could say, but he needed a mother for Daisy. Don't get me wrong, he would have made you a caring, respectful husband."

She leaned across and placed her finger against his lips to stop him saying more. "I know what you're trying to say. I read it between the lines of his letter."

"Maybe you should meet Daisy first before we commit ourselves. I have to be honest. Daisy's needs must come first."

"I understand. You sound like a good, caring uncle."

"I'm not. I'm clueless when it comes to little girls."

"And big girls," she queried.

"Yes, them, too. Look, um. I promised Daisy we would have supper at the diner tonight. You come, too, and see how you both get on."

"Thank you, I'd like that."

"Um, do you have a dress to wear?"

"No, all I've got is what's in my saddlebags. I had to make a hasty escape from Laramie, and I sold my horse for the stagecoach ticket."

"A hasty escape? What do you mean?"

"I knotted sheets together and climbed out of a second-floor window."

Shock darkened his eyes to a deep chocolate color. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Zoey. Why don't you go to the hotel and book yourself in, and I'll call for you about five? After school, Daisy goes to one of her little friend's place. They look after her until I can pick her up after work."

"It must be hard for you having to juggle so many things."

"It is, but Hank, my deputy, has been helpful. Once I get him trained, I'll give up being sheriff and run the ranch full time."

He sounded like a decent man, and she desperately hoped she and Daisy would get along well. She admired Oliver for putting his niece first. It was the right and proper thing to do.

"Oh, um, I'll give you the money for the hotel room," he said suddenly.

"Thank you." She hated the idea of accepting money from him, but under the circumstances she had no choice.

“I’ll walk you to the hotel, then I can check on the saloon on the way back. I like to keep an eye on things so I can stop any trouble before it starts.” He placed his hat on his head, picked up her saddlebags and held the door open for her. His gentlemanly actions were pleasing. If she were honest, everything about Oliver Gentry pleased her.

Out in the street they walked a foot or two apart. The sun glinted on the tin star he wore pinned to his black vest. He wore twin Colts and instinctively she knew he would know how to use them.

She caught the interested stares of a few passersby. She didn’t know why, but she felt safe with Oliver. On such short acquaintance she liked him. Given time, she could like him very much. That’s if he gave her the chance. It all depended on whether Daisy liked her. She had never had much to do with children, but had always liked them.

If he decided not to marry her, she would have to leave Broken River immediately in case Vince or Seth tried to find her. She did not doubt for one moment that death would be a better option than what they would have planned for her.

“Here we are.” Oliver’s voice intruded on her fear-filled thoughts. “It isn’t fancy, but it’s comfortable.”

“I feel bad about letting you pay for my accommodation.” She touched his arm. “I just don’t have much money left.”

“If you become my wife, I will be responsible for all your expenses.”

“And if I don’t?”

He shrugged. “I guess I will be a couple of dollars out of pocket. Anyway, we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

She fervently hoped things would not come to that, and she would not be forced to leave Broken River.

Chapter Eight

Zoey waited anxiously in the lobby of the hotel for Oliver and Daisy to arrive. She still wore her travelling clothes, but had been able to take a bath. It was so good immersing her body in the warm water, she could have stayed there forever. Luckily, she had clean undergarments to change into. What if Oliver decided not to come? What if little Daisy disliked her? She fretted and worried.

If Oliver and Daisy didn't want her in their lives, she would leave on the morning stage and travel as far as her meager supply of money would allow. It was the only option open to her. Exactly where she would go and what she would do when she got there, she had no idea. Her perilous position weighed so heavily on her, she wondered how she could stand up straight.

"Do you think Zoey will want to be my mother?" Daisy asked Oliver as they walked toward the hotel.

"I'm sure she will, but it's you I'm worried about, sweetheart. You might not like her, and I won't go through with the marriage unless you do. We've been getting by." Only just.

Had Daisy been a boy, things would have been much easier for him. He wanted to be a good father to her, but just didn't know how, and he hated feeling so inadequate.

As they walked into the hotel lobby, he spotted Zoey straight away. She still wore the figure hugging pants, but her pretty, copper colored hair tumbled loosely over her shoulders, with two thin plates crossed at the back and tied with a blue ribbon. What would she look like wearing a pretty dress?

"Is that her, Uncle Ollie?"

Zoey swung around and her tremulous smile left him weak at the knees. She was a real pretty girl; no, young woman, he quickly corrected himself. He could scarcely believe what she had suggested in his office, about wanting a real marriage. He had been prepared to have a marriage in name only until they got to know each other better. Making Zoey his wife on their wedding night, he sure wouldn't say no to that. No living, breathing man would.

"Howdy, Zoey," he said, wondering whether his voice sounded as husky to her as it did to him.

"Howdy, yourself. And this beautiful young lady has to be Daisy."

"Yes, I'm Daisy. Can you plait hair properly?"

“Of course, I can. I often wear my hair plaited.”

“You do? Pa could do it, but Uncle Ollie can’t. Can you wash clothes good?”

“Yes.”

“Uncle Ollie can’t. Look what he did!”

Oliver cringed as Daisy lifted her skirt and showed off the greyish looking petticoat.

“I mixed all the white and colored stuff together,” he said, feeling like a fool.

“I still love you, Uncle Ollie.” Daisy patted his hand. “Even if you can’t look after me as good as pa did, but he had more practice.” She gave a little chuckle.

“I’m doing my best, sweetheart, and I will get better, I promise.”

Zoey’s heart went out to them both. Daisy was a pretty child, with enormous brown eyes and dark hair. There was a striking resemblance between her and Oliver. Would Joseph have looked similar to them?

“I’m glad you don’t mind me sharing supper with you,” Zoey said with a smile, “and I’m sorry about your father. I’m sure he’ll be looking down on you from heaven, and be proud that you’re being such a brave girl.”

“That’s what Uncle Ollie says. Are you going to live with us? You could get married to Uncle Ollie and make a baby brother for me.”

Zoey felt her cheeks heat up. “We’ll have to see.” She glanced desperately at Oliver, silently pleading for him to change the course of the conversation to something more suitable.

“I’m going to have the beef steak,” he said. “It’s the best for miles around.”

“I’ll have that, too,” she said. “What about you?” She glanced down at the little girl who was walking between them now.

“I want pancakes.”

“You need vegetables,” he said.

“I don’t like vegetables, Uncle Ollie.”

“If they’re fresh, they taste nice. Don’t you grow your own?” Zoey asked.

“I haven’t bothered much with the garden. Joe wasn’t big on gardening, either.”

They arrived at the diner, and were shown to a corner table by a smiling young woman. “Well, Sheriff, what will you have?”

“We’ll have two of your steaks, Della and…”

“Pancakes,” Daisy piped up.

“She has to have vegetables,” he said.

“She could have pancakes and a bowl of vegetables,” Zoey suggested.

“Good idea. Does that suit you, Daisy?” Della asked.

“Yes. This lady is called Zoey, and she might be my new mother.”

“Oh?” Della’s eyebrows rose in query.

“If we all like each other,” the child went on.

Zoey squirmed in her seat as Della’s eyes swept over her. They showed neither approval nor disapproval. She had no idea what to say, so chose to remain silent.

“She was a friend of Joe’s,” Oliver finally said.

“Daisy will have a glass of milk, black coffee for me and…”

“I’ll have coffee with cream, thanks.”

Della nodded and hurried away.

Daisy shook Zoey’s hand, looking at her with big, soulful eyes. “Did I say something bad?”

“No, you didn’t, darling. I would love to be your mother, but it’s important that we make sure you would be happy if your uncle and I got married.”

“I am. I am. I never had a mother before.”

“You did,” Oliver said gently, “but she died when you were small, which is why you don’t remember.”

“The other kids at school have all got mothers.”

“Yes.” Zoey squeezed the little suntanned hand. “But I bet they don’t have an uncle who is a sheriff.”

This little girl was so sweet, Zoey’s heart bled for her. This child would quickly wriggle her way into her heart, if given the chance.

They seemed to have an instant rapport. It was Oliver’s decision, though, and she didn’t blame him for being wary, because what he did now would affect Daisy for the rest of her life. He could not afford to make a mistake.

“Did you read the letters I wrote to your brother?”

“Yes, I did when I was looking for your address.”

“Hopefully, your letter will go astray, or the mercantile will decide not to pass it on to Seth.”

“Are you going to marry Zoey, Uncle Ollie?”

“Do you want me to?”

Daisy vigorously nodded her head.

“You don’t have to be frightened anymore, Zoey. Write to your stepfather and tell him you’re married to me and that will be the end of it.”

She gnawed her lip. “What if it isn’t?”

“It will be. You can’t marry two men.”

“I hope that will be the end of it. I don’t want to bring any trouble down on you and Daisy. Seth is obsessed and Vince is evil.”

“Don’t worry, I can look after myself and what’s mine. I’ll be calling in to see the preacher after I escort you back to the hotel. Hopefully, he will agree to marry us tomorrow, then you can move in with us straight away.”

Daisy clapped her hands. “Yes. Yes. What will I call you?”

“Whatever you like.”

“Ma?”

“Of course, if that’s what you want. I would be proud to be called your ma.”

Their food arrived and Zoey nearly drooled over the fat juicy steak, which was slathered in gravy and accompanied by potato mash and greens. “Thanks, Della, it looks delicious.” Zoey smiled. This was the happiest she had felt in months, because the black cloud of marrying Vince no longer dragged her into the black depths of fear and despair.

Oliver’s meal was similar to hers, except the steak was larger. Daisy had three small pancakes and a neat little serving of potato mash and beans.

“Eat the vegetables first,” Zoey said.

“Why?”

“Because I always like to finish a meal with my favorite food, that way I can taste it on my tongue for a while afterward.”

Daisy nodded her head and started on her vegetables.

“I’m never able to get her to eat vegetables without a battle,” he said.

“You have to be subtle that’s the secret to success.”

Oliver had good manners, she noticed and Daisy also. Ma had been strict on good manners for her, yet she had put up with slovenly behavior from Seth and Frank. Stop thinking about them she scolded herself, you have better things to think of now.

“Other than Joseph, do you have any other relatives?”

“Not that I know of. Laura’s cousin was the one who looked after Daisy.”

“It must have been hard on everyone. Do you have any pets, Daisy?”

“No, I’d like a puppy, but my pa always used to say they were too much trouble.”

“If you promised to look after it, maybe your uncle would agree to you having one.”

“Can I, Uncle Ollie? Can I?”

He suddenly grinned. “I know where I might be able to get one in a few months.” He told them about the episode with the old lady and her dog. “Those two dogs were mighty interested in each other,” he said for Daisy’s benefit, although Zoey knew what he meant.

“Did you used to live on a ranch?” the little girl asked.

“Yes, I did. It was quite a large one.”

“Cattle?” Oliver asked.

“Yes. It was profitable, and for all his faults Seth was a smart rancher. He was ruthless though, and always made life hard for the small surrounding ranchers so he could by them out cheaply. I can do most outside ranch chores, too.”

“I wouldn’t expect my wife to do ranch chores, other than milk and look after the chickens.”

“I used to help out with branding and at the spring round up if they were short-handed.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to do those kinds of things. You said you can cook.”

“Yes, I can. I’m quite good, even if I do say so myself.”

“Can you make bread?” Daisy asked as she finished the last of her vegetables.

“Yes, but you don’t live far from town, so you could buy it.”

“That’s what we do now, don’t we, Uncle Ollie?”

“Yes.” He gave a theatrical shudder for Daisy’s benefit. “Sweetheart, expecting any man to make bread unless he is a baker is... Hang on, the preacher and his wife have just walked past. If I can catch them outside, it will save me going to see them later.” He shot to his feet and dashed out of the diner.

“I wish you could come home with us tonight.” Daisy looked beseechingly at her. “Uncle Ollie looks sad sometimes.”

“I know it’s been hard for you both, but I can’t come and stay with

you tonight. It wouldn't be the right thing to do, not until we get married."

"You won't go away?"

"No, I won't, I promise."

A grinning Oliver strode back to them. "We'll be getting hitched tomorrow at ten o'clock."

"I want to come and see it."

"You'll be at school," Oliver said.

Daisy's face fell.

"I'll be able to walk down and fetch you from school, though," Zoey said. "Will that make up for it?"

Daisy nodded, although she still looked disappointed.

"It was the only time the preacher could do it. He'll be out of town for the rest of the week, and won't be back until just before Sunday service, and I didn't want to wait that long."

"Me, either." The quicker she became Mrs. Oliver Gentry, the safer she would feel.

Chapter Nine

A week later

Zoey and Oliver were truly a married couple now. She was beginning to have strong feelings for her new husband. How he felt about her, she had no idea, but he was a loving and considerate man. After Zoey took Daisy to school on the first day, they decided that he would drop her off at school in the morning, and she would pick her up in the afternoon. This gave Oliver a chance to stay at work longer. He would return about six o'clock for supper.

Zoey had written a letter to Seth, telling him she was happily married now, without saying who her husband was or where they lived. If by chance he had not received Oliver's letter, which she prayed he hadn't, he would have no idea where she lived.

The ranch was a nice, compact size for one capable man to handle, with a couple of casual cowboys signed on for the busy periods. There was a well near the back porch, and she had already started work on the abandoned vegetable garden.

The walk to school was only a couple of miles and she enjoyed accompanying Daisy. In the winter, she would probably drive the buckboard until Daisy was old enough to ride down by herself. Life had settled into a nice routine for all of them.

She could not believe how fond of Daisy she had become. The little girl had quickly claimed her heart. Tonight, they were going to have roast chicken. She had already plucked the bird ready to put in the oven after school.

Joseph had left the ranch to Oliver with the proviso he would always make sure Daisy was well provided for. It was too soon yet, but both her and Oliver hoped she would one day call him pa. Sometimes she thought he was hurt because Daisy had started calling her ma straight away.

"You can't rush things," she had said, trying to console him. "You have to be patient and wait for her to do it of her own accord, and she will."

"I suppose so," he had said. "But I'm an impatient man."

"Ooh, I know that Mr. Gentry." She had teased him back into a good mood.

On the spur of the moment, she decided to put the chicken on to roast before she left for school. It was quite a large bird and she didn't want supper to be late, or worse still, have it under cooked.

Zoey walked slowly down to the one room log schoolhouse. She did not particularly like the schoolteacher, who was a plain, rather hard-faced woman; a little too snappy with the children to her way of thinking.

She waited outside the gate for the school to be dismissed. Why would a hardened old maid want to be a schoolteacher, anyway?

The ringing of the school dismissal bell interrupted her thoughts. Noisy children surged out of the schoolroom and either headed for the pony paddock out back to collect their mounts or started walking home. A couple of mothers had driven down in buckboards, including Ruth, Daisy's little friend's mother, and the lady who used to pick her up and mind her until Oliver collected her after work. Zoey waved to her and nodded to a couple of other mothers. She was starting to get to know a few of the women now, but didn't want to come over as too forward, not in a new town. She had Oliver's position as sheriff to consider, as well.

A few people had somehow discovered she was Joseph's mail order bride, and most were understanding about it. She sensed animosity from a few women, including the teacher. The woman had positively looked daggers at her on their first meeting. Had she fancied Oliver?

Worry started building up when there was no sign of Daisy. Finally, she walked up to the schoolhouse door, which was open. Peering inside, she was shocked to see Daisy cowering in a corner, her pale cheeks stained with tears. Zoey stepped inside and opened her arms. It was the catalyst for the child to make a mad dash toward her.

"Daisy Gentry. Stop right there."

The teacher's harsh tones stopped the child in her tracks.

"Now, get back to the corner and stay there until I tell you to go."

"Look here," Zoey said. "School has finished for the day and I've come to collect her."

"She's being punished."

"For what?"

"Disobeying me and wetting herself like a baby."

"Miss Martin wouldn't let me go to the privy."

Zoey didn't know how she restrained herself from physically attacking this horrible woman. "Is that true? You wouldn't let her go to the privy?"

"Yes."

"I tried to hold on, only I couldn't," Daisy wailed, with tears coursing down her pale cheeks.

“Why wouldn’t you let her go out when she needed to?”

“I made her stay inside for punishment.”

“All day?” Zoey wondered why she didn’t see steam coming out of her ears, she was so enraged. “You vicious cow. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I’m in charge here and I can do as I wish.” The woman stood with her hands on her hips.

“That’s torture and I won’t stand for it. No child should be treated like this.”

“Oh, Miss Hoity-Toity, thinking you’re so much better than everyone else, just because you married the sheriff. I know you were supposed to be Joseph’s mail order bride.”

“What if I was? No man would have an ugly shrew like you, no matter how long he had been writing to you.” Zoey was so angry she was beyond caring what she said. “One look at you would scare any man off.”

“Why you…you…”

“Listen to me, Miss Martin. If Daisy does something wrong, she deserves to be punished but not like this. I’m warning you.” She shook her finger at the woman. “Do this again and I will slap your face until your ears ring. Got it?”

“How dare you threaten me. I’ll report you.”

“Report away, see if I care. Come along, Daisy.” She reached over and took the child’s hand. “And if you feel tempted to pick on her again, just remember this. I always carry a gun and I know how to use it.”

“You can’t threaten me,” Miss Martin shrieked.

“I just have. And believe me, I mean it.” Gathering up Daisy’s uneaten lunch, her chalk and slate, she shoved them into the bag she had recently made, took Daisy by the hand, and left the schoolhouse.

“Will Uncle Ollie be angry?”

“Yes.”

Daisy burst out crying and Zoey picked her up and gave her a hug. “Not with you, darling, her. If I didn’t have a chicken on cooking, I would walk into town and tell him right now.” Under her breath Zoey called the teacher every horrible name she could think of, and there were quite a few, as Frank had a foul mouth, not to mention Seth’s shocking language.

“She hit me, too.”

If Daisy had not been with her, she would have turned back, marched

into the school room and slapped the teacher hard.

“I can’t carry you all the way home, darling, you’re too heavy.”

“It’s hard to walk with wet drawers.”

Zoey glanced around. “Go behind those bushes and you can take them off.”

“Wear nothing?”

Zoey nodded. “No-one except us will know.” She helped the child remove her wet drawers and was shocked to see her hands were still shaking with fury. For two pins she would take Daisy out of the school and teach her at home. How could a teacher treat a child like this? It was disgraceful. The woman was not fit to teach children and should be dismissed.

As they walked along, she asked. “What naughty thing did you do?”

“I punched Reuben.”

“That wasn’t a nice thing to do.”

“He kept pulling my hair. I only wanted him to stop.”

The punishment certainly didn’t fit the crime. The teacher’s treatment of Daisy had been outrageous.

“We’re having roast chicken tonight. How about we mix up some batter and make pancakes for a treat?”

“Yes, I want to do that.”

“Good. Now don’t you be worrying about Miss Martin. You just do your schoolwork and not be naughty and everything will be fine.”

“She’ll hate me now.”

“No, she won’t. She knows I won’t stand for you being picked on. She’s not a nice person, but she is your teacher, so you have to be polite and well behaved when you’re at school, but that’s it.”

Chapter Ten

On arrival at the ranch, they walked through the gate which she closed behind her. It was a sturdy wood and stone house. There was a high-pitched roof and two front facing loft bedroom windows. Daisy had one, the other was their spare room. If God looked kindly upon them, it wouldn't remain empty for too long. She wanted to have Oliver's baby. How he felt about it, she had no idea, as they still had a lot to find out about each other, although the more she got to know him, the more she liked him. He was a good man, and she counted her blessings for having found him. God had certainly been smiling upon her.

"You go to the bedroom, put on some clean drawers, while I check the chicken to see how it's cooking, then we can make the pancakes."

While Daisy hurried off, Zoey took several steadying breaths. The ugly encounter had shaken her. She was not normally a violent person; in fact, had always considered herself reasonably placid, but the teacher should not be allowed to get away with what she had done.

Thankfully, when Daisy returned, she seemed recovered from her ordeal.

"I was thinking maybe we could put a handful of currents in the pancake mix. What do you think?"

"Yes, it will taste good."

"I think so, too. I'll get you a drink of cold water, then we can start work straight away."

Supper was almost ready to be served and Zoey was reading Daisy a story when Oliver stalked in.

"What on earth got into you?" he growled the moment he stepped into the sitting room. "I've had the teacher screaming and yelling at me, saying you abused her and threatened to shoot her. Did you?"

"Yes."

"Zoey! Have you lost your mind? You can't go around threatening people."

"No, I haven't lost my mind, that…that creature ill-treated Daisy and I wouldn't stand for it."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "She has to maintain discipline."

"By making a child stay inside the classroom all day? Refusing to let her relieve herself."

"What?"

“Miss Martin made me stand in the corner all day, Uncle Ollie. I wet myself, too, cause I couldn’t go to the privy.” Tears filled her eyes.

“Is this true?”

“Yes, it is,” Zoey snapped. “Do you want to check her wet drawers?”

“No, of course not. I can’t believe it. I ought to put my hands around the woman’s scrawny throat and…”

“Zoey was brave, and she saved me.”

“I’m glad she was there for you. Are you’re okay now, sweetheart?”

“Yes.”

“You run off to the kitchen and get ready to eat.”

She scuttled off.

“Exactly what happened?” Zoey told him everything, and his shocked expression soon changed to one of fury. “Has she done this before?”

“I don’t know, but she won’t pick on Daisy again or I will slap her.”

“What about shoot her? She told me you threatened her.”

“I guess I wouldn’t really shoot her, but she doesn’t need to know that, but I certainly would slap her as hard as I could.”

“What are we going to do about it? She will probably have it in for Daisy now.”

“I don’t think so, Oliver. She’s a bully and a coward, and she knows I won’t stand for any of this kind of thing again. It will be me she hates, not Daisy. Anyway, I’ve warned the woman, who now knows what to expect if she fails to do the right thing.”

“You probably went too far.” He leaned across and kissed her on the forehead. “I’m glad you did. It will save me giving her a good talking to. So, my little kitten has sharp claws, eh?”

“Yes, you better believe it, when I’m fighting for someone I care for.”

“Would you fight so tenaciously for me?” He stared unblinkingly into her eyes. Something burned deep within them, although she was not sure what.

“Yes, Oliver. I would.”

“That’s good.” He gently ran his forefinger across her lips.

“I better check how our supper is doing.” She turned away to hide the tears springing to her eyes. She had as good as told him she loved him, yet he had made no declaration at all, which meant he didn’t have strong feelings for her.

Out in the kitchen, Daisy sat looking doleful. “What’s wrong, darling?”

“I think Uncle Ollie is mad at me.”

“No, he’s not. He was angry, but not with you. What do you think? Will we keep those leftover pancakes for ourselves, or share them with your uncle?”

“Share them with Uncle Ollie.”

“Share what with me?”

“Ma and me made pancakes with currents in them when we got home from school. We had some left over.”

“I would like some; they sound delicious. Ma is a good cook, eh?”

The chicken was cooked to perfection, as were the vegetables, and Zoey had to force them down her throat. She could not believe how hurt she felt because Oliver had not mentioned anything about how he felt.

“What’s wrong with you?” he suddenly asked.

“Nothing.”

“Well, you look like you’ve lost a dollar and only found a dime.”

“You’re imagining it.”

“I am not. I was thinking. I’ve got Saturday off. Why don’t we go for a ride and I can show you our swimming hole?”

“Ooh, yes,” Daisy clapped her hands. “Today is only Thursday.” Her smile faded somewhat.

“That’s all right,” Zoey said. “It will give us time to bake a few nice treats to take with us.” She put her own hurt aside, so as not to upset the little girl anymore. She had been through enough already today.

After Daisy had gone to bed and they were in the sitting room, Oliver got up and started to pace the floor, then he spun around to face her. “Maybe we should keep her home from school tomorrow.”

“No, then that witch of a woman will think she’s won.”

“I’ll speak to her in the morning when I drop Daisy off. To think she had the nerve to come complaining to me about you, after what she had done.”

“I think it would be a good idea for you to tell her you’re not happy about what she did, and there will be serious repercussions if it happens again. You’re the sheriff, so what you say will carry more weight.”

“Maybe. You know, I used to think she was okay. I mean, she’s as plain as a fence post, but seemed pleasant enough.”

“Maybe she fancied you.”

He shrugged. “I never gave her any encouragement. There’s only one

woman I want." He stepped over to her. "I want her very much."

"Do you care for me, Oliver?"

"What kind of question is that? I've shown you every night since we've been married, haven't I?"

"A man doesn't need to have strong feelings for his wife to claim his marital rights."

He let out a shocked gasp. "You think that's all it is? Me wanting to claim my husbandly dues?"

"I don't know. You've never said one way or the other what you feel about me."

"Surely you knew."

"I didn't. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Not without me, you're not." He grasped her shoulders and stared her in the eye, his gaze unflinching. "I have feelings for you, Zoey. I…I… think, no, I'm certain. I love you with all my heart."

"You do? Why didn't you say so before?" Her heartbeat escalated and hope flared in her breast.

"I thought you knew."

"How could I if you didn't tell me?"

"I'm not much for flowery words. It just isn't my way."

"Do you think your brother would mind, about us, I mean?"

"No, Joe would be glad. He wanted me to write away for a mail order bride at the same time he did. A good thing I didn't" He grinned. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have picked up a gem like you."

"You might have found someone better than me."

"No, I could search the whole of Colorado and not find anyone as special as you, Zoey."

Happiness surged through her. "That's quite a flowery speech, Sheriff Gentry."

Chapter Eleven

Next morning, Daisy was hesitant about going to school and Zoey didn't blame the child. Had she been Daisy, she would never have wanted to set foot inside the place ever again.

"Don't worry, your uncle will take you right up to the door and speak to Miss Martin before he leaves. Everything will be fine, I promise. Bring me your hairbrush and I'll do your hair for you. Maybe we can leave it loose except for two thin plaits on either side, which we can cross over at the back and tie with that pretty pink ribbon from the box of candy your uncle bought me."

Daisy nodded her head in agreement. Once her hair was done, Zoey said. "We ladies have to know how to make ourselves look pretty. It builds up our confidence."

"You both look pretty to me," Oliver said as he came into the kitchen, shrugging into his leather vest. "I'm a lucky man, having the two prettiest girls in Broken River living with me."

"Do you really think I'm pretty, Uncle Ollie?"

"You certainly are. In a few years, I'll have to beat the boys away from you with a stick."

Daisy giggled.

"Ham and eggs?" Zoey asked him.

"Yes, thanks."

Zoey dished up eggs on toast for Daisy and ham, eggs and fried bread for Oliver, keeping an egg and a small piece of ham for herself.

The other two waited for her to sit down and say grace before they started eating.

"This is good. I don't know what you do, but it turns out a hundred times better than mine," Oliver said.

Zoey laughed. "You're too impatient and cook it too quickly."

"Uncle Ollie, if I call you pa, will you get me a baby brother?"

He spluttered into his coffee.

"Then we can be a real family."

"I will, um, work on it. Okay?"

"Yes, pa."

"You've made me very happy, sweetheart. I'll be proud to be called your pa."

"If I call you pa, that doesn't mean I have to forget my other pa, does

it?"

"Of course not. Your pa was my brother so we'll both carry him around in our hearts forever. He wanted me to become your pa if something happened to him. He wrote it down in Mr. Bartholomew's office. I can show the letter to you when you're a little older."

Zoey brushed a tear from her eye, and thanked God for sending her to Oliver and Daisy.

Three months later

While they were eating breakfast, Zoey had broken the news to Oliver about expecting his baby. She didn't know why she had thought this was the right time to tell him. Any doubts she had about whether he would be pleased or not were dispelled by his whoops and hollers. He picked an excited Daisy up and they danced around the room.

"I want a brother," Daisy said.

"We just have to see what God gives us," Zoey told her.

"You heard your mother. God was looking kindly on me the day you walked into my life. I'll be forever grateful, and now this. I am the happiest man in Colorado. And all because of Joe." A shadow fleetingly passed across his face.

"I'm sure he would be glad we're so happy," she said.

"I know. Daisy, are you ready for school now?"

"Yes. I'm glad Miss Martin is nicer to me now. Even the other kids think she's better."

"I know. I passed her in town the other day and she almost smiled at me." Oliver grinned. "That showdown you had with her must have woken her up to how bad her behavior was."

Zoey laughed. "I couldn't believe it when she apologized to Daisy and I for her behavior. She said she had let personal problems intrude on her teaching position."

"As long as she's learned her lesson, it's not for us to hold a grudge. Now, come along, sweetheart, I don't want to be late. It sets a bad example."

Oliver leaned in and kissed Zoey. What was meant to be a quick goodbye kiss quickly became something longer, more passionate and Zoey wished he didn't have to leave right now.

She stood on the porch to wave them goodbye, then returned inside to start on the housework. It was getting closer to winter now, with a definite chill invading the air, she decided as she fed an extra log on

the fire.

Mid-morning, a knock came at the front door. Who could that be? They rarely had uninvited visitors. Running her hands along her apron to straighten it out, she walked to the door and opened it.

The breath caught in her throat. Her knees almost gave way. “Vince.” Frantically, she looked for Oliver’s Winchester. It hung on the wall bracket and was too far away for her to reach it. Fearfully, she gazed at the twin guns he wore.

He was badly in need of a shave, dusty and travel worn. Deep lines gouged either side of his mouth.

“You leave me alone.” Fear raced through her body. “I’m married now. To the sheriff.”

“I know. I haven’t come to hurt you or cause trouble.”

“Seth got the letter.”

“Yeah, the ones from you and Sheriff Gentry.”

“I’m not going back. I would die first.” It was a lie when she had her baby to consider, but he didn’t know that. “Please, Vince. Leave me alone and find yourself another woman.”

“I already have.”

“You have?”

“Yes, I’ve been writing to her from prison for three years.”

“Three years? But Seth said I had to marry you.”

“Yeah, well, it was his idea, not mine. Anyway, pa is dead.”

“What!” She would have fallen had Vince not grabbed her by the arms.

She fought to get away.

“I mean you no harm, like I said before, Zoey. I found God while I was in prison. I’m a reformed man.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I am, and I hate myself for the way I used to be.”

“What happened to your father?” Zoey could scarcely believe she was hearing right.

“Not long after we got back to the ranch from Laramie, he was ranting and raving about you running off. Got himself so worked up he just dropped dead at my feet.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” It was the best she could come up with. It would be sheer hypocrisy to pretend she was upset about Seth’s passing. All she felt was relief.

“Thanks. It was only a matter of time before his heart gave out on him, the way he used to get worked up and carry on. Getting all het up over nothing.”

“Would you like to come in for some coffee?”

“I wouldn’t mind a cup, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“I can’t believe you found God.” She gave him a suspicious look.

“I have, Zoey, and it makes me sorry and ashamed for the way I used to be.”

“How’s Frank?”

Vince followed her into the kitchen.

“He’s okay. Much better now pa has gone. He left me the ranch, but I’ve taken Frank in as a partner. It’s only fair he should have half of it. Pa got queer in the head as he got older.”

She could not believe this was the man who had instilled such fear in her for most of her life.

“I’ve pulled down the wall and the gate, too. It was an abomination. It sickened me every time I saw it. Not to mention dangerous. If a wildfire roared through, we would have been trapped like rats in a trap.”

“Seth built it to keep me in.”

“Yeah.” He nodded his thanks for the coffee.

“Help yourself to cream and sugar.”

“I drink it black. Got used to it that way in prison. I’m trying to right some of the wrongs pa did.”

“That’s decent of you.”

“I want to start my married life with a clean slate.” He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Clean slate, and I’m marrying a schoolteacher.”

“A schoolteacher?” Her voice rose slightly with the shock.

“Yes. She teaches around here. Myra Martin is her name.”

“Oh, my goodness. We had a …”

“Myra told me what happened between you. She knows she shouldn’t have treated her pupils so harshly, but she thought I had lied to her; promised marriage while I was in prison just so she would write to me. I’d promised to come here straight after I got released, and I didn’t because of pa. I wanted to get him back to the ranch. He was vowing to come after you and drag you back home. And if Gentry is the kind of man that I heard he was, there could have been bloodshed.

I couldn't take the risk, in case innocent people got hurt."

"Your father was an awful man."

"He was obsessed about you and me marrying and in the end, I reckon it drove him into madness." Vince sighed. "I could never get it through to him I didn't want to marry you. He just wouldn't listen."

"It was awful the way he carried on, but I met and married Oliver because of it, so it turned out well for me in the end. We're very happy."

"I'm glad. Anyway, pa's death held me up and Myra thought I'd forsaken her." His callused hand covered hers. "I'm really sorry."

Oliver suddenly appeared in the kitchen, guns drawn. "Take your filthy hands off her," he snarled. "Just give me an excuse to kill you."

"It's all right, Oliver. Vince isn't hurting me." In a few words she explained what had happened.

Oliver all but collapsed on to a chair. "I'm sorry. When someone told my deputy Vince Jamieson was looking for Zoey, I panicked."

"Have a cup of coffee." She poured him out a cup. "My stepfather is dead, and Vince has given half the ranch to his brother."

"It's only fair. Given half a chance, Frank will be all right," Vince said. "He was scared of our father for most of his life and it affected him."

"I can't believe you're marrying Miss Martin." Oliver took a gulp of coffee. "When?"

"As soon as we can. She's found a temporary replacement until Christmas, then the school board will hire someone permanent."

"Are you sure about marrying Myra? She's…"

"Oliver!"

"Well, she's no beauty, any man can see that," Oliver went on.

"Don't be unkind, she's well…"

"She's beautiful to me," Vince said. "And she's got such a good heart."

Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, Zoey thought, but she was glad for Myra's sake and Vince. She discretely pinched herself on the arm to make sure it was not a dream, then had to stifle a yelp of pain. It was certainly no dream. She would probably have a bruise there tomorrow.

"This looks like a nice little place," Vince said.

"It is. Once my deputy is trained up, probably by Christmas, I'm going to become a fulltime rancher."

"Oliver will be able to do so much more then," she said.

“Well, darling, I better get back to work, now I know you’re safe.” Oliver kissed her on the forehead.

“I might go with you,” Vince said. “It should be nearly lunchtime at the school, so I’ll have it with Myra. Today will be her last day there.”

“Will you need witnesses for the marriage?” She was surprised to hear Oliver ask the question. “We could stand up for you.”

“Thanks, but no. Myra’s sister lives only about a four-hour ride away. Her brother-in-law is a preacher, so he can marry us, then we’ll head back to Buttress.”

“I hope you’ll be happy, Vince.”

“Thanks, I will be. It was through her brother-in-law, the preacher, that I met Myra. Fate is a strange thing, isn’t it?”

“It sure is,” Oliver said.

“Good luck, Vince,” Zoey said and meant it.

“Thanks.”

“Give Frank my regards.”

“I will. It’s doubtful we’ll meet again,” Vince said, “but drop Myra a line now and again. I don’t want us to lose touch completely.”

“All right. Will I see you when I pick Daisy up?” she asked.

“Probably not. I’ve got a few things to do in town. The moment school finishes, Myra and I want to be on our way.”

As Zoey stood on the front porch watching the men stride toward their horses, she heard Oliver say, “Zoey and I are having a baby.”

Once they mounted, Oliver gave her a wave and Vince touched his hat before they rode off.

She could scarcely believe how different Vince was now, compared to the angry man he used to be. She had thought prison would have made him worse, yet he had found God and Myra and could now look forward to a decent, happy life.

He can’t be as happy as me, though. I have a loving husband a beautiful daughter and in a few months a baby. What more could a woman want?

EPILOGUE

A little over two years later

Eighteen-month-old Joseph toddled up to the front door and started hitting it with a tiny bunched up first, as if that would make it open for him.

How he knew when it was nearly time for Daisy to return from school and ride into the front yard, Zoey had no idea. The little boy adored Daisy, who was such a good little mother to him. It was a joy to see them together, not to mention helpful to her. She was already expecting again, and this time she was feeling very off color and was glad of any help she could get.

Oliver had handed over his sheriff's badge to his deputy, and now worked the ranch full time and it was starting to pay dividends. They were doing well after a shaky start.

"Daisy, Daisy," Joseph called out. It was one of only a few words he could enunciate clearly.

"All right. All right. Don't be such an impatient little man. You're just like your father."

"I am not impatient." Zoey jumped when Oliver spoke from behind her. He must have entered the house by the backdoor.

"Oh, you nearly frightened the wits out of me. What are you doing home so early?"

"You said you weren't feeling well, and I just wanted to see how you were."

"I'm all right, it's just that I had it so good with Joseph, it's hard having all the usual mother-to-be symptoms for the first time."

"It's probably a girl we're having. Women are always trouble." He grinned.

"Yes, well, you'll be laughing on the other side of your face if this one," she patted her stomach, "doesn't sleep well like Joseph did. He was the perfect baby, who just ate and slept. I don't think we'll be so lucky a second time around."

"Daisy, Daisy." Joseph's little fists kept pounding the door.

"You better take him outside on the porch to wait, in case he punches a hole in the door," she said.

"Hey, Joe." Oliver picked up his son. "Is it time for Daisy to come home?"

"Daisy, Daisy."

"Well now, I know what it's like to play second fiddle to someone else. He couldn't care less about me," Oliver said.

"It's your own fault," she said with a laugh. "You were the one who started it all off, putting him on the front of her pony."

"I didn't think he'd like it so much."

"Well, he does, it's a ritual with him now. How he knows what time

she always arrives is a complete mystery to me," Zoey said.

"He's smart like his pa, aren't you, son?" Oliver opened the door.

"Of course, he is," she said. "Handsome like his father, too." She linked her arm through Oliver's as they stepped onto the porch.

In the distance, she could see Daisy riding up the road on her pony, Blossom.

"I'll help her unsaddle when she gets around the back," Oliver said. "Then I'll head off to finish a couple of chores. After that I'll be back."

Daisy rode well, thanks to Oliver's teaching. He had made sure she learned how to care for her pony, Blossom, as well as ride her.

"Daisy, Daisy," Joseph screamed excitedly, waving his arms around.

"You can have the honor of walking beside them, seeing as you're here," she told her husband, give him a wide smile.

When Daisy rode into the front yard, she yelled, "I'm home."

"Yes, I can see. Once you've looked after Blossom, I'll have your cookies and milk ready. Pa has to go back to work."

Oliver stepped up and placed Joseph in front of Daisy and held him as Blossom walked toward the stable area.

"Did you have a good day?" Zoey heard Oliver ask.

"Yes."

Myra was writing every now and again, and her and Vince had promised to call in with their six-month-old son, Andrew, on their way to visit Myra's sister. Who would have believed they would end up friends with the couple after such a rocky start to their relationship?

Frank was courting a nice girl from Buttress and the ranch was prospering.

Zoey could not believe how well life had turned out for all of them, and she would be forever grateful for it.

The End.

If you enjoyed reading this book a short review on Amazon would be much appreciated.

Author Links

Amazon Author Page:
https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B003T5216E
Book Bub Author profile:
https://www.bookbub.com/authors/margaret-tanner

Margaret's Reader Page on Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/groups/406184620325836/

About the Author:

Margaret Tanner is an award winning, bestselling Australian author, who mainly writes Historical Romance and Historical Western Romance. She loves delving into the pages of history as she carries out research for her novels. No internet site is too boring, no book is too old or tattered for her to trawl through, no museum too dusty.

Her love of Westerns came about because of the movies and TV shows of her childhood. Some of her favorite ones were Gunsmoke, Bonanza, Wagon Train, and Little House on The Prairie.

Many of her novels have been inspired by true events, with one being written around the hardships and triumphs of her pioneering ancestors. She once spent a couple of hours in an old prison cell so she could feel the chilling cold and fear.

Apart from her family and friends, writing is her passion.

Margaret is married with three grown up sons and two gorgeous little granddaughters.

Other Books by me can be found on my Amazon page:

https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B003T5216E